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# Can Georgia Join NATO Without Solving the Conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia?

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Since the Rose Revolution, Georgia has sought to anchor itself to the West in order to consolidate its democratic transition. While the goal of acceding to NATO was first declared by former President Eduard Shevardnadze in 2002, his successor, President Mikheil Saakashvili, has introduced the kinds of radical reforms that may make Georgia a viable candidate. The country has set the goal of acquiring a Membership Action Plan (MAP) status at the upcoming NATO Summit in Bucharest in April 2008.

Georgia is making impressive progress in its internal reforms. And the desire to eventually join NATO, which enjoys overwhelming popular support in Georgia and is one of the few points of agreement among all the major political parties, is part of the reason why. As Georgia's candidacy becomes more and more credible, the debate in the West over Tbilisi's candidacy has also stepped up. One central issue is whether and how Georgia can be a viable candidate for NATO, and perhaps obtain MAP at Bucharest, so long as it has two frozen conflicts on its soil in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Should the West consider the resolution of such conflicts a precondition for a Georgia candidacy, or is the prospect of NATO membership and a Western anchor essential to a solution? Will embracing Georgia and giving it a MAP perspective — assuming it qualifies on technical grounds — make Tbilisi a more reliable and responsible actor or, as some critics argue, embolden it to act irresponsibly?

Critics of Georgia's membership in MAP and eventual membership in NATO often suggest that the unresolved conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia should be seen as impediments. This paper argues that this view is wrong for several reasons. The resolution of these conflicts is not entirely in Georgia's hands, as outside powers, especially Russia, wield great influence. To make resolution a precondition for NATO membership would give Russia an effective veto over possible Georgian membership and, in all likelihood, encourage Moscow in its current aggressive policies. Moreover, Georgia is

pursuing a strategy to resolve the conflicts and is making some progress in this regard. For reasons detailed below, we believe strongly that supporting Georgia's NATO bid would help contribute to their resolution.

We do not in this paper attempt to assess the full case for Georgia in NATO. Those arguments are addressed in greater detail in other papers in this series. We leave the merits of those claims for others to judge (although, as noted, we find them compelling). Our goal is to look more closely at the role of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia's membership bid. Principally, do or should the conflicts pose a barrier to admission? And second, would admission contribute to conflict resolution or inhibit it?

## Background

Within the former Soviet Union, the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) included the Abkhazian Autonomous SSR and the South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast. In the waning years of the USSR, tensions rose in both regions, which escalated into armed conflicts during and after the period of Georgia's independence. The civil war in South Ossetia ended in 1992, and in Abkhazia in 1993. Both conflict zones have been subject to (frequently violated) ceasefire agreements (among Georgia, Russia, and the separatist authorities), and are monitored by peacekeeping forces and international observers. And both remain unresolved, practically and politically.

Ironically, the West at that time — unwilling or unable to become more directly involved itself — encouraged a quasi-democratic Russia, under the leadership of President Boris Yeltsin and Foreign Minister Andrei Kozyrev, to take the lead in peacekeeping efforts in the region. Thus, Russian forces today operate under internally recognized mandates established in the early 1990s even while their role has long ceased to be a neutral one and they have become party to the conflicts.



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What is the situation today? Georgia's internationally recognized territory is that of the former Georgian SSR, which obviously includes Abkhazia and South Ossetia.<sup>1</sup> Abkhazia and South Ossetia are self-declared independent states, but remain unrecognized by any other. Both separatist regimes are dominated by the titular ethnic group, and both receive considerable support from Russia, which has granted passports to most of the regions' inhabitants. Other circumstances differ between the two, with concomitantly varying prospects for conflict resolution; South Ossetia is widely considered the more artificial of the two conflicts.

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The authorities in the Abkhazian capital, Sokhumi,<sup>2</sup> exercise control over nearly all of the former Abkhazian ASSR (Georgia has recently reestablished control over the thinly populated Kodori Gorge, to which it has relocated the Government of Abkhazia in exile). The Gali District has seen the voluntary return of ethnic Georgians, who now constitute about 90 percent of its population. A nominally Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) peacekeeping force (in fact, entirely Russian) maintains the ceasefire, and a UN observer mission (UNOMIG) monitors all parties in the security zone. Since independence, Tbilisi has regarded Abkhazia as an autonomous Republic of Georgia.

The conflict in Abkhazia saw the almost complete displacement and ethnic cleansing of Georgians, upwards of 200,000 displaced persons live in Georgia today; most in wretched conditions. Abkhazia also lost many of its non-Georgian residents to emigration, and is a fraction of its

former size; a visit to its capital finds many neighborhoods completely deserted. There are no recent census figures, but most observers estimate that Abkhazia today has about equal numbers of Abkhaz, Armenians, and Georgians.<sup>3</sup>

South Ossetia, by contrast, is a patchwork of ethnically Georgian, Ossetian, and mixed villages, and the reality and future prospects of co-existence are much better. The authorities in the capital, Tskhinvali, exercise control over about 60 percent of the former South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast (AO).<sup>4</sup> A Georgian-backed alternative administration (the Sanakoev government) has recently been established in the village of Kurta. A joint peacekeeping force of Georgian, Russian, and Ossetian battalions maintains the ceasefire, and an Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) observer group monitors all parties in the security zone. Until recently, Tbilisi did not recognize any administrative district called "South Ossetia," but a newly established state commission is to determine South Ossetia's autonomous status within Georgia.

Russia plays a prominent role in stoking both conflicts. It backed separatist forces during the civil wars, and continues to provide military assistance to the de facto governments. Russian border officials and peacekeeping forces are involved in smuggling across the Russian-Abkhazian and Russian-South Ossetian borders, and across the internal borders in Georgia. Russia maintains a military base at Gudauta, in Abkhazia, which it is obligated to vacate under the Conventional Forces in Europe treaty. In the last year, Russian aircraft have launched missiles at Kodori and at a site in Georgia close to the border with South Ossetia.

Most residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia have been granted Russian citizenship, and Russia has taken many other measures to effectively annex the regions without formally recognizing them. As Kosovo approaches international recognition of its independence from Serbia, Russian politicians insist on a "Kosovo precedent"—that Abkhazia's and South Ossetia's cases for independence are more legitimate than Kosovo's, and so must perforce be granted if Kosovo's is. As it does in many other arenas, Russia consistently thwarts efforts at conflict resolution

<sup>1</sup> Georgia's borders with its former-Soviet neighbors, Russia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, are the old Soviet internal administrative boundaries and are not fully demarcated. There are no important border disputes with those neighbors, except for a small cave complex on the Georgia-Azerbaijan border.

<sup>2</sup> This spelling, a transliteration of the Georgian name, is conventional in the international literature; the Abkhazian name is Sokhumi.

<sup>3</sup> The last Soviet census, in 1989, put Abkhazia's population at a little over a half million—a bit less than one-half Georgian and about one-sixth Abkhaz. Today's population is likely not more than two-hundred thousand. For an assessment of the various estimates, see International Crisis Group, "Abkhazia Today," Europe Report No. 176, 2006. Online at [www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=4377&l=1](http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=4377&l=1).

<sup>4</sup> The 1989 census put South Ossetia's population at one-hundred thousand—about two-thirds Ossetian and one-third Georgian. Today's population is perhaps 70,000, and the composition is unknown.



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that might restore Georgia's territorial integrity and lessen its own control over the region.

### What is Georgian strategy to resolve these conflicts?

The origins of, and responsibility for, the conflicts are beyond the scope of this paper (and are something of a distraction from their resolutions). They emerged from a toxic brew of semi-official criminal entities in Georgia, tentatively allied with hyper-nationalists, opportunistic secessionists, and Russian security forces manipulating events to maintain the chaos. Russian malfeasance extended to its own territory, where it inflamed conflicts in Chechnya and across the North Caucasus. President Shevardnadze did little to address the root causes of the conflicts or to change the rules of the game, and so the conflicts came to be seen as "frozen."

But peaceful resolution of the conflicts has been central to the Saakashvili Administration's platform, and it has reinvigorated the effort, as part of the sweeping process of democratic transformation. Fundamentally, President Saakashvili reinforces that Georgia is a republic based on a civic identity, and not an ethno-national state that merely tolerates its minorities. The symbols and rhetoric of the Rose Revolution struck some as jingoistic, but in consolidating the revolution Saakashvili has redefined it as civic nationalism — he typically punctuates his speeches with appeals to all of Georgia's ethnic groups.

Within Georgia proper, the government has made a considerable effort to improve conditions and foster civic integration in the predominantly ethnic Azeri and Armenian regions. This internal exercise of soft power is being extended to the secessionist regions as well. The investment in the Georgian- and Sanakoev-governed parts of South Ossetia will demonstrate to the people under Tskhinvali's control that Georgia is an open, secure, and prosperous country that welcomes their return. The prospect of closer ties to the West and eventual NATO membership is part and parcel of this domestic strategy to resolve the conflicts.

This strategy has already met with great success in Ajara, the autonomous republic on the Black Sea that had been under a strongman's rule until Saakashvili returned it to a closer union with Tbilisi in 2004. Since then, tourism and investment have boomed, and a new airport offers direct flights to points other than Moscow. NATO member-state warships now call on Ajara's harbors. South Ossetia is a more contrived polity than Ajara, and is more open

to Russia and less easily governed, but there are signs that Georgia's strategy is working, and Kokoity's rule is faltering. Abkhazia is, as usual, a tougher nut to crack, as its population is more isolated, and Russia's stake is so much greater — and its grip so much firmer.

At the same time, some voices in Georgia argue for a less patient approach. They contend that it is naïve to think that the lure of "the West" will draw the secessionists away from their Russian protectors, and that the international community will not go the distance in helping Georgia win them back by peaceful means. Georgia must, they contend, build its forces so as to compel reintegration, by military action if necessary (which, they take for granted, it will be). Georgia's military budget has grown by leaps and bounds, to the alarm of some observers. But Georgia, for now, has no other means of ensuring its security, as recent aerial assaults on its territory confirm. Once Georgia is in NATO, its military spending could be in line with that of other new members, and those resources could be diverted to pressing social needs and conflict resolution.

For now, the more hawkish elements of Georgian domestic politics do not have the upper hand, and the Government's approach has popular support. NATO's encouragement and Georgia's evident progress towards membership are instrumental in maintaining that support. Should those efforts falter, and the conflicts appear irresolvable without Western engagement, military options and the parties that advocate them may win over an exhausted public. Georgia is not using this menacing scenario to exact a MAP from NATO, but NATO decision-makers should bear in mind that they have considerable influence over who decides, and how, in Tbilisi.

While NATO expects that Georgia will pursue a broad range of reforms, and offers considerable support in some areas, these various Georgian policies on conflict resolution are unilateral and not obligatory. Georgians and their neighbors are accustomed to empty rhetoric and can see through it. These new policies are substantive and reflect institutional changes in Georgia's approach to the conflicts. Concerning South Ossetia, for example, Prime Minister Zurab Noghaidei has presented a peace initiative to the OSCE Permanent Council and the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (as did President Saakashvili in an earlier version to the UN General Assembly). Georgia has passed a law on restitution for all victims of the conflict. And the commission on status will soon present its draft to the European Union and the Council of Europe's Venice Commission.



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While Russia's influence is pervasive and malign, we should not deny the separatist leaders and peoples their feelings. Their resistance to accommodation and reintegration (under as yet unspecified terms) with Georgia reflects honestly felt fears and resentments, concerns for security, and ignorance of the options available to them. The Abkhaz and Ossetians have no more organic a connection to Russia than they do to Georgia. The notion of an independent South Ossetia and a somewhat less chimerical independent Abkhazia are impractical. Both entities need to be part of larger political structures. For now, *de facto* incorporation into Russia appears to many in these regions to be the best option. It has been difficult for Georgia to present itself as a more promising option.

But Georgia in NATO could have a greater appeal than Georgia standing alone. NATO is a much better guarantor of security from larger, external threats than is Russia (or the CSTO, or SCO). Whatever fears or suspicions the residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia might have about Georgian designs on them might be allayed by the tempering influence of NATO membership on member states, in matters of internal security, rule of law, and minority rights. Do the Abkhaz or Ossetians imagine that a NATO member state would respond to internal unrest as Russia has in Chechnya — or, indeed, in Beslan, North Ossetia? The excesses of the French campaign in Algeria and the Turkish campaign against the Kurds in the Southeast are in the past — not to say that Tbilisi harbors similar intentions towards the Abkhaz or Ossetians.

Georgia is moving rapidly on all fronts to present its case to the people of South Ossetia. In the areas controlled

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by Georgia or the Sanakoev administration, Tbilisi is pouring in investment in infrastructure, business, and recreation. The Sanakoev administration is forward looking and optimistic, contrasting with the grim tone of the Tskhinvali authorities, and is well received in European capitals. Georgia hopes to demonstrate in South Ossetia, by word and deed, that it seeks rapprochement and that a future with Georgia is brighter than one with Russia. NATO membership and the entry to a larger community that it affords should only add to the appeal.

This logic is not ironclad. Deeply held animus can trump appeals to economic or security self interest, but we do not know which will prevail in South Ossetia (there are no reliable surveys of public opinion, and attitudes can change as the facts on the ground do), and some recent events suggest that the Georgian strategy is paying dividends. For a host of reasons, Georgia's challenges in reintegrating Abkhazia are greater, but that conflict is not fundamentally different in kind from the one in South Ossetia, and it may admit to a similar variety of solutions.

In the worst case, Abkhazia and South Ossetia would remain outside of Tbilisi's control, but without the protection of Russian forces. The peacekeeping forces in Abkhazia and South Ossetia operate at Georgia's forbearance; as corrupt and partisan as they are, they do allow for unarmed international observers to operate in the conflict zones, so Georgia continues to tolerate them. But an international peacekeeping force could perform the same function. Georgia has already sought to internationalize the peacekeeping contingents and several new NATO members and aspirants have offered to contribute troops, although NATO itself has not considered such a mandate (and the UN Security Council has rejected it). There is no precedent for a NATO peacekeeping force in a member state, but Georgia could make a compelling case for this novelty, as it has demonstrated its commitment to collective security with its participation in peacekeeping operations in Kosovo and Afghanistan, and in civil affairs in the coalition in Iraq.

### NATO connection

What role does or could NATO and a membership perspective for Georgia have in resolving these conflicts? How has the Alliance dealt with similar situations in the past — to the degree that there are relevant historical parallels?

A quick look at NATO's own history shows more than a few ethnic conflicts and even insurgencies. A number of NATO members have had and today still have territorial disputes — both between member states, and between member and non-member states — or are involved in insurgencies on their soil. The most obvious example is the ongoing tensions and conflict between Greece and Turkey — even though both have been members of the Alliance for half a century. Spain joined NATO, with the support of the United Kingdom, even though Madrid still had a claim to sovereignty over Gibraltar — a dispute that has yet to be settled.



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The United Kingdom and Spain battled separatist insurgencies in Northern Ireland and on the Basque issues for decades. Turkey faces a major insurgency in its Southeast with the PKK. Yet no one suggests that these disturbances should have kept them from joining the Alliance or from membership today. France of course fought and lost a civil war in Algeria while a NATO member in good standing. We note these historical precedents simply to underscore that NATO has been prepared, under different historical and strategic conditions, to bring in new members with unresolved conflicts on their soil.

We do not mean to overdraw the analogies. Abkhazia is not Northern Ireland, and South Ossetia is not the Basque country. The United Kingdom and Spain maintained control over their territories, if not a monopoly on violence, and the conflicts did not pose existential threats to the states. We also recognize that there is a clear difference between what NATO demanded from new members in the 1950s, at the height of the Cold War, and what it expects from them today, in the post-Cold War era. In the 1990s, the Alliance shifted strategy and clearly raised the bar on what was expected from new members. It could afford to, given the benign strategic environment; moreover, the strategy exploited Central and Eastern European countries' NATO aspirations to spur them to resolve historical grievances and bilateral disputes. The new NATO enlargement strategy of the 1990s posited two important benchmarks, 1) a candidate country had to meet the qualifications of membership and 2) the Alliance had to conclude that bringing it in served NATO's strategic interests. These two benchmarks remain NATO's policy today.

So for Georgia the key question is: Can it meet those qualifications? The fine print of core documents — for example, the NATO enlargement study of 1995 — shows that the Alliance was very particular in how it addressed these issues. In this document, NATO itself does not condition membership on explicit terms of territorial integrity.<sup>5</sup> There are two relevant clauses. Chapter 1, "Purposes and principles of enlargement," reads:

*States which have ethnic disputes or external territorial disputes, including irredentist claims, or internal jurisdictional disputes must settle those disputes by peaceful means in accordance with OSCE principles. Resolution of such disputes would be a factor in determining whether to invite a state to join the Alliance (para. 6).*

And in Chapter 5, "What prospective new members will need to do politically to prepare themselves for membership," it restates:

*Prospective members will have to have demonstrated a commitment to and respect for OSCE norms and principles, including the resolution of ethnic disputes, external territorial disputes including irredentist claims or internal jurisdictional disputes by peaceful means, as referred to also in paragraph 6 of Chapter 1 (para. 72).*

Note that there is no explicit official requirement that any disputes must have been settled before an invitation to join can be extended. The carefully worded language requires that aspirant states be engaged in conflict resolution and be seen as having done everything possible. But it prescribes a process, not an end-state, because even then NATO realized that it was dangerous to give a third party involved in a conflict an effective back door veto over a country joining the Alliance. In short, NATO has tried to preserve its flexibility.

At the same time, the United States and NATO policy was often tougher in practice than it was in theory. Key members — especially the United States but often the Alliance as a whole — pursued a tough-love policy that used the carrot of membership to try to resolve real or potential conflicts in Central and Eastern Europe. Today it is often forgotten how big an issue this was in the early 1990s. Thus, Hungary and Romania discovered that resolving their own bilateral issues was an implicit precondition for being offered a membership perspective. Poland needed to settle its issues with Lithuania. Slovakia was denied a membership perspective in the run-up to the Madrid Summit for several reasons, including the Meciar government's nationalism and its posturing on the minority issue. The Baltic states discovered that coming up with legislation on Russian speakers that met Western standards was a central part of the U.S.-Baltic Charter as well as European willingness to support their candidacies.<sup>6</sup> At the same time, the Baltic states were admitted to the Alliance without their border disputes with Russia being fully resolved.

### What is at stake?

What does this mean for Georgia today? Perhaps the closest parallel is the Baltic states, which in many ways have inspired the Georgian quest to join NATO. However,

<sup>5</sup> Study on NATO Enlargement, Brussels: North Atlantic Treaty Organization, 1995. Online at [www.nato.int/docu/basic/txt/enl-9501.htm](http://www.nato.int/docu/basic/txt/enl-9501.htm).

<sup>6</sup> Ronald D. Asmus, *Opening NATO's Door: How the Alliance Remade Itself for a New Era*, New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2002.



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unlike Georgia, the Baltic states were fortunate to have negotiated Soviet troop withdrawals in the 1990s, with the help of the Nordic states and the United States. Otherwise, they too might have had frozen conflicts, which would have made their EU and NATO quest much more difficult. But the Baltic example is also noteworthy for another reason. NATO was always careful not to give Russia any semblance of a veto. NATO states quietly worked behind the scenes to pressure the Baltic states to meet standards for the treatment of minorities that were higher than those generally observed in Western Europe. And in private the message was quite clear — unless and until you meet those standards it will be politically impossible to support your admission.

Georgia is not asking for any lowering of these standards. It does not mind a tough-love strategy because it knows the end-state will be a better Georgia. It is looking for recognition from the West that the resolution of these conflicts is, in many ways, not in its own hands. It is asking for allied understanding and support for a Georgian strategy that seeks to use soft power to resolve these conflicts. It is seeking to use a closer relationship with NATO to help secure a Western anchor and a perspective that offers its population a democratic, stable, and secure future. It is trying to explain to skeptics that only when South Ossetian and Abkhaz societies see that their future will be better off in a democratic and prospering Georgia, moving Westward, will their loyalties shift and the possibility to negotiate a peaceful resolution of these conflicts become real.

While Georgians will have to do most of the heavy lifting in resolving these conflicts themselves, this is how and why NATO can be part of the resolution. We also believe that, if the moment comes that Moscow concludes that Georgia is on a track to eventual NATO membership, then and only then will Moscow lose its motivation for manipulating the separatist entities to thwart Georgia. But there is another far more worrying scenario that cannot be excluded: if the West fails to realize the important role that bringing Georgia closer to NATO can play. Failure to embrace Georgia could have two negative and possibly disastrous consequences.

The first is that it could embolden Moscow to behave more aggressively vis-à-vis Tbilisi, as it concludes that the lack of such a perspective tacitly gives it a pale green light to interfere even more aggressively in Georgian affairs, and to pursue a policy of regime change. This cannot be excluded, and in this sense the upcoming Bucharest summit is both an opportunity and a potential moment of vulner-

ability for Georgia.

The second potentially dangerous consequence is that those political forces working to build a democratic Georgia and seeking to use soft power to resolve these conflicts fail — in part because of a lack of Western support — and that those forces who have argued all along that Georgia could never count on the West and may have to go it alone could eventually gain the upper hand. The one lesson that NATO should have learned from the experience of the 1990s is that transition democracies are far more likely to do the right thing and to take difficult steps when they feel more rather than less secure, and when the Western embrace is real. That applies to Georgia today as well.

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